

Paul's Pastoral Appeal



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gal. 4:12–20, 1 Cor. 11:1, Phil. 3:17, 1 Cor. 9:19–23, 2 Cor. 4:7–12.*

Memory Text: “Friends, I beg you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are” (*Galatians 4:12, NRSV*).

As we've seen so far, Paul did not mince words with the Galatians. His strong language, however, simply reflected the inspired passion he felt concerning the spiritual welfare of the church that he had founded. Besides the crucial theological issue Paul was dealing with, the letter to the Galatians in a broad sense also shows just how important correct doctrine is. If what we believed were not that important, if doctrinal correctness did not matter all that much, then why would Paul have been so fervent, so uncompromising, in his letter? The truth is, of course, that what we believe matters greatly, especially concerning the whole question of the gospel.

In Galatians 4:12–20 Paul continues his discourse, though he changes his approach, at least a bit. Paul has made a number of detailed and theologically sophisticated arguments to persuade the Galatians of their errors, and now he makes a more personal, pastoral appeal. Unlike the false teachers who had no true interest in the Galatians, Paul reveals the genuine concern, hope, and love of a good shepherd for his wayward flock. He was not just correcting theology; he was seeking to minister to those whom he loved.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 26.

The Heart of Paul

Read Galatians 4:12–20. What is the thrust of Paul’s message in these verses?

The initial indication of the concern that weighs heavily on Paul’s heart is his personal appeal in verse 12. The appeal follows immediately after Paul’s insistence that the Galatians “become as I am.” The significance of the word *entreat* or *beseech* is, unfortunately, not fully conveyed in some translations. The word in Greek is *deomai*. Although it can be translated “to urge” (*NKJV*) or “to entreat” (*ESV*), the Greek word has a stronger sense of desperation connected to it (see *2 Cor.* 5:20, 8:4, 10:2). Paul is really saying, “I’m begging you!”

Paul’s concern, therefore, was not simply about theological ideas and doctrinal points of view. His heart was bound up with the lives of the people who were brought to Christ through his ministry. He considered himself more than just a friend; he was their spiritual father, and they were his children. But even more than that, Paul likens his concern for the Galatians to the worry and anguish that accompany a mother in childbirth (*Gal.* 4:19). Paul had thought that his previous “labor” had been sufficient for their “safe delivery” when he founded the church. But now that the Galatians had wandered from the truth, Paul was experiencing those labor pains all over again in order to secure their well-being.

What goal did Paul have in mind for the Galatians? What result did he want to see from all his “labor” in their behalf? *Gal.* 4:19.

Having first described the Galatians as being formed in the womb, Paul now speaks of the Galatians as if they were expectant mothers themselves. The word translated as “formed” is used medically to refer to the development of an embryo. Through this metaphor Paul describes what it means to be Christian, both individually and collectively as a church. To be a follower of Christ is more than just the profession of faith; it involves a radical transformation into the likeness of Christ. Paul was “not looking for a few minor alterations in the Galatians but for such a transformation that to see them would be to see Christ.”—Leon Morris, *Galatians* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 142.

In what ways have you seen the character of Christ manifested in your life? In what areas do you still have a lot of growing to do?

The Challenge to Become

Read 1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 3:17; 2 Thessalonians 3:7–9; and Acts 26:28, 29. What is Paul saying there that is reflected in Galatians 4:12? How are we to understand his point?

Several times throughout his letters, Paul encourages Christians to imitate his behavior. In each situation, Paul presents himself as an authoritative example that believers should follow. In 2 Thessalonians 3:7–9, Paul offers himself as an example of how the believers in Thessalonica should work to earn their own living and not be a burden on others. In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul calls upon the Corinthians to imitate him in placing the welfare of others first. However, Paul’s concern in Galatians appears to be somewhat different.

In Galatians 4:12, Paul does not ask the Galatians to *imitate* him. Instead, he asks that they “become as” he is—he is talking about being, not acting. Why? The trouble in Galatia was not unethical behavior or an ungodly lifestyle as in the church in Corinth. The issue in Galatia was rooted in the essence of Christianity itself. It was more about “being” than “behavior.” Paul was not saying *act* like me, but *be what I am*. The exact terminology in Galatians 4:12 occurs in Paul’s appeal to Herod Agrippa II in Acts 26:29 (*ESV*), where Paul writes, “I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might *become* such as *I am*—except for these chains” (emphasis supplied). In other words, Paul is referring to his experience as a Christian, a foundation that rests on Christ alone, a faith that trusts in what Christ has done for him and not in his works of the law. The Galatians were placing greater value on their behavior than on their identity in Christ.

Although Paul does not specifically say how he wants the Galatians to become like him, the context of the situation in Galatians indicates it was not a blanket statement that covered every aspect and detail of his life. Because his concern was with the law-centered religion of the Galatians, Paul surely had in mind the wonderful love, joy, freedom, and certainty of salvation he had found in Jesus Christ. In light of the surpassing wonder of Christ, Paul had learned to count everything else as rubbish (*Phil. 3:5–9*)—and he longed for the Galatians themselves to have that same experience.

Is there someone you know (other than Jesus) who sets a good example for you? If so, what are the qualities of that person that you find so exemplary, and how can you better reveal those qualities in your life?

I Have Become as You Are

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. What does Paul say in these verses that can help us understand better his point in the latter part of Galatians 4:12? (See also Acts 17:16–34, 1 Cor. 8:8–13, Gal. 2:11–14.)

Galatians 4:12 can seem a little confusing. Why should the Galatians become like Paul, if he already had become like them?

As we saw in yesterday’s lesson, Paul wanted the Galatians to become like him in his complete faith and confidence in the all-sufficiency of Christ for salvation. His comment about having become like them was a reminder of how, although he was a Jew, he had become a Gentile “without the law” so that he might reach the Gentiles among them with the gospel. As the great missionary to the Gentile world, Paul had learned how to preach the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. In fact, according to 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, though the gospel remained the same, Paul’s method varied depending on the people he was trying to reach.

“Paul was a pioneer in what we call today contextualization, the need to communicate the gospel in such a way that it speaks to the total context of the people to whom it is addressed.”—Timothy George, *The New American Commentary: Galatians* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), p. 321.

Paul’s own comments in 1 Corinthians 9:21 indicate that he believed there were limits to how far someone should go in contextualizing the gospel. He mentions, for example, that while one is free to reach out in different ways to Jews and Gentiles, this freedom does not include the right to live a lawless lifestyle, for Christians are under the “law of Christ.”

Although contextualization is not always easy, “insofar as we are able to separate the heart of the gospel from its cultural cocoon, to contextualize the message of Christ without compromising its content, we too should become imitators of Paul.”—Timothy George, *Galatians*, pp. 321, 322.

It’s so easy to compromise, isn’t it? Sometimes the longer one is a Christian, the easier compromise gets, too. Why might that be so? Look at yourself, honestly. How much compromise has crept into your life, and what have been the ways you have justified it? How can you turn this around in areas in which you need to do so?

Then and Now

Paul's relationship with the Galatian believers was not always as difficult and frigid as it has now become. In fact, as Paul reflects on the time when he first preached the gospel in Galatia, he speaks in glowing terms of how well they treated him. What happened?

What event seems to have led to Paul's decision to preach the gospel in Galatia? *Gal. 4:13.*

Apparently it had not been Paul's original intention to preach the gospel in Galatia. Some sort of illness, however, overtook him on his journey, forcing him either to stay longer in Galatia than expected or to travel to Galatia for his recovery. Mystery surrounds the exact nature of Paul's malady. Some have suggested that he contracted malaria. Others (on the basis of Paul's reference to the Galatians' willingness to pluck out their eyes and give them to him) suggest that it was perhaps an eye disease. His illness also may have been connected to the "thorn in the flesh" he mentions in 2 Corinthians 12:7–9.

Whatever Paul was suffering from, he does tell us it was so unpleasant that it became a trial to the Galatians. In a world where illness was often seen as a sign of divine displeasure (*John 9:1, 2; Luke 13:1–4*), Paul's illness easily could have provided the Galatians with an excuse to reject both him and his message. But they welcomed Paul wholeheartedly. Why? Because their hearts had been warmed by the preaching of the Cross (*Gal. 3:1*) and the conviction of the Holy Spirit. What reason could they give now for their change of attitude?

What might have been God's reasons for allowing Paul to suffer? How could Paul minister to others when he was struggling with his own problems? *Rom. 8:28, 2 Cor. 4:7–12, 12:7–10.*

Whatever Paul's illness was, it certainly was serious, and it easily could have provided him with an excuse either to blame God for his problems or simply to give up on preaching the gospel. Paul did neither. Instead of letting his situation get the best of him, Paul used it as an opportunity to rely more fully on God's grace. "Time and again God has used the adversities of life—sickness, persecution, poverty, even natural disasters and inexplicable tragedies—as occasions to display his mercy and grace and as a means to advance the gospel."—Timothy George, *Galatians*, pp. 323, 324.

How can you learn to let your trials and suffering make you lean more upon the Lord? (What other options do you have?)

Speaking the Truth

Read Galatians 4:16. What powerful point is Paul making there? In what ways might you yourself have experienced something similar? (See also John 3:19; Matt. 26:64, 65; and Jer. 36:17–23.)

The expression “speaking the truth” often has negative connotations, especially in our day and age when it can be viewed as a hard-hitting, no-holds-barred, spare-no-enemies tactic of telling someone the facts, no matter how unpleasant or unwanted they may be. If it were not for Paul’s comments in Galatians 4:12–20 and a few other comments scattered throughout his letter (see Gal. 6:9, 10), one might mistakenly conclude that Paul’s interest in the truth of the gospel outweighed any expression of love. Yet, as we’ve seen, though Paul was concerned about the Galatians knowing the “truth of the gospel” (see Gal. 2:5, 14), that concern arose because of his love for them. Who hasn’t experienced personally just how painful it can be to have to chastise someone or, in plain terms, speak truths to him or her that—for whatever reason—he or she doesn’t want to hear? We do it because we care about the person, not because we want to cause hurt, though at times the immediate effect of our words is hurt or even anger and resentment against us. We do it anyway, because we know it is what the person needs to hear, no matter how much he or she might not want to do so.

In Galatians 4:17–20, what is Paul saying about those whom he is opposing? What else is he challenging besides their theology?

In contrast to the candor of Paul’s gospel, by which he risked the possible ire of the Galatians, his opponents were actively courting the favor of the Galatians—not out of love for the Galatians but out of their own selfish motives. It is unclear exactly what Paul means when he says that his opponents “want to shut you out,” though this perhaps refers to an attempt to shut them out of the privileges of the gospel until they first submit to circumcision.

Think of some incident when your words, however truthful and needed, caused someone to be angry with you. What did you learn from the experience that could help you next time you need to do something similar?

Further Thought: “In the Galatian churches, open, unmasked error was supplanting the gospel message. Christ, the true foundation of the faith, was virtually renounced for the obsolete ceremonies of Judaism. The apostle saw that if the believers in Galatia were saved from the dangerous influences which threatened them, the most decisive measures must be taken, the sharpest warnings given.

“An important lesson for every minister of Christ to learn is that of adapting his labors to the condition of those whom he seeks to benefit. Tenderness, patience, decision, and firmness are alike needful; but these are to be exercised with proper discrimination. To deal wisely with different classes of minds, under varied circumstances and conditions, is a work requiring wisdom and judgment enlightened and sanctified by the Spirit of God. . . .

“Paul pleaded with those who had once known in their lives the power of God, to return to their first love of gospel truth. With unanswerable arguments he set before them their privilege of becoming free men and women in Christ, through whose atoning grace all who make full surrender are clothed with the robe of His righteousness. He took the position that every soul who would be saved must have a genuine, personal experience in the things of God.

“The apostle’s earnest words of entreaty were not fruitless. The Holy Spirit wrought with mighty power, and many whose feet had wandered into strange paths, returned to their former faith in the gospel. Henceforth they were steadfast in the liberty wherewith Christ had made them free.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 385, 386, 388.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Dwell more on the whole question of suffering and how God can use it. How do we deal with situations in which nothing good appears to have come from suffering?
- ② Meditate on the idea of Christ being formed in us. What does this mean in practical terms? How can we know that this is happening to us? How do we keep from being discouraged if it’s not happening as quickly as we think it should?

Summary: Having made a number of detailed and theologically sophisticated arguments, Paul now makes a more personal and emotional appeal to the Galatians. He begs them to listen to his counsel, reminding them of the positive relationship they once shared and of the genuine love and concern he has for them as their spiritual parent.